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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the "anchor" language learning method that is based upon derivation rather than construction, using Italian as an example of a language to be learned. This method borrows from the natural process of language learning as it asks the student to remember whole expressions that serve as vehicles for learning both words and rules, which may later result in additional expressions. The starting point is a collection of sentences grouped according to a single, common, often irregular, verb. Further anchors are also based on basic parts of speech. Pronunciation is taught using imitative English spelling and general remarks. Memorization is also important, and students are taught phrases that can actually be used with fellow students; affective content is stressed above cognitive content. Test results are offered from students who learned from an Italian grammar (class average 7.3) and those who learned via the anchored method (class average 8.59); a 15% improvement is demonstrated with the anchor method. (NAV)

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ED 388 043

# The "Anchor" Method: Principle and Practice

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Paul Selgin

INTRODUCTION

THE "ANCHOR" METHOD: PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE.
With grade comparison

Necessity is the mother of invention, not a bad generalization, and true of this particular "invention", if that's the word for it.

In itself, the "anchor" method of learning languages is much older than the wheel, since that's how we learn our own language. We learn, by imitation, how to express our wants, needs, opinions: never unconnected words from lists, much less rules or conjugations: we remember these only by deriving them from expressions - sentences - repeated and heard countless times. This is also how we learn foreign languages when we have a chance to live among native speakers: isolated words are learned too, when we need them to express ourselves or understand what we hear or read. Rules are hardly ever learned as such, but habit tells us when the grammar is wrong and we apply them without knowing them.

In spite of all this, it's not absurd to claim that the "anchor" method of language learning, based on derivation rather than construction, constitutes invention when applied to the teaching of foreign languages through home-study or classroom instruction. If learning by imitation is older than the wheel, its simulation by means of a text and recommended exercises is not: we're not re-inventing the wheel, merely applying it on a vehicle that all can use.

If we really want to quibble, though, we can question the "necessity" for such an invention, or "proposed reform" if this the more acceptable choice of words. Excellent textbooks exist, and they embody all sorts of imaginative stratagems for making instruction interesting: dialogs and examples taken from typical students' concerns,

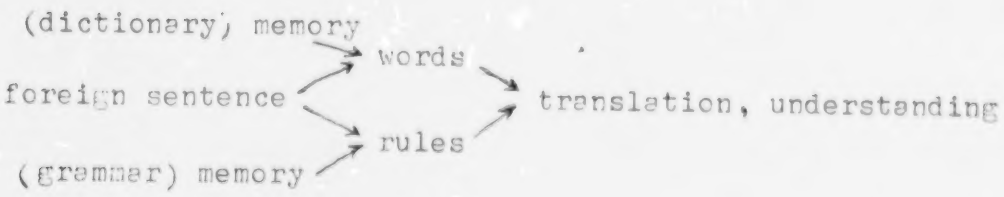
informative narratives and descriptions, photos and humor. And they do their job. I used several: I assigned homework, gave class-tests taken from these books or very similar in design, had students read aloud and translate segments included for the purpose, act out dialogs, read and translate other material; explained relationships between words of common origin, encouraged questions and went to the root of every apparent contradiction. I corrected homework, most of it diligently done with relatively few errors, and my final grades were generally from C to A and fairly given, to everyone's satisfaction. Then why bother to invent a new method? What necessity mothered this particular invention - or "attempted reform", if the words fit better?

The necessity was born of deep dissatisfaction. With very few exceptions, when students asked me to say something in French or Italian, the two languages I taught, they could not understand, no matter how slowly and distinctly I talked to them. This was after a year of memorizing and filling page after page of homework. And it wasn't my pronounciation, of this I'm quite sure: in fact I spoke much more carefully than I'm used to, or than natives do. And of course I said only the simplest things.

There were exceptions. Students of Italian parentage understood certain expressions and repeated them in their own dialect, showing that they were absorbed through use or habit, not "learned". French students did better for two reasons: many French expressions have become part of English and therefore familiar: also, the grammar used was published in England for English students who take frequent trips across the Channel, hence full of useful expressions for people who travel: these were learned whole, not just the words: but the words were absorbed as a result.

Manuals designed along similar lines, to teach tourists simple sentences for asking directions, ordering meals and making themselves understood in common travel situations, are widely used and helpful, but no one suggests that you could learn a language by such means: programs purporting to teach a language over a week-end are probably based on similar methods, with the same limitations.

The most rational method for learning a language has always relied on memorization of words and rules for putting them together in sentences, in order to express whatever the occasion demands: or, conversely, for taking apart and understanding what is heard or read. Symbolically, in both directions:

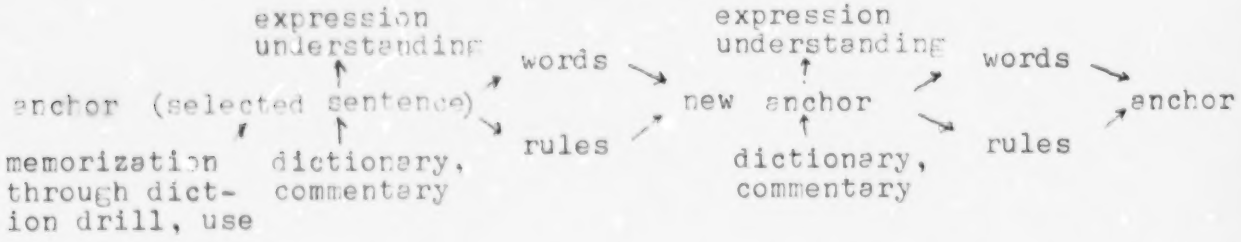



In plain words: to express yourself in a foreign language (upper diagram) you need words and rules. You can, in time, learn all you need by heart, and if time permits you can look them up. Then you construct your sentence: for simple messages, of course, no "construction" is really needed. But committing enough words to memory, and recalling them when needed, as separate unconnected bits of knowledge, is a massive undertaking - not to mention conjugation of verbs and the rest of it.

The lower diagram applies to the reverse process: translation,

or simply understanding a foreign expression or sentence. Here, too, the conventional approach requires us to recognize and understand the words, from memory or with dictionary help if there is time, and to make sense out of them by our knowledge of grammar rules, memorized or assisted. To this colossal feat of memory we have to add, if the medium is speech, the job of making out words from their sound, often the hardest of all.

The "anchor" method is still rational enough, but it borrows from the natural process of language learning in that it asks the student to remember <u>whole</u> expressions which serve as vehicles for learning both words and rules, from which in turn more expressions can be put together. Again, symbolically:




This time we only need one diagram for both "directions", expression and understanding. It's also an "unfinished" diagram, indicating that the learning process can go on and on, with each new anchor (or set of anchors ) generating words and rules for the next. The method is "open-ended" and the student can carry it as far as he or she wants. We'll go over the diagram briefly before going on to the <u>practical</u> side, calling for an outline of the book itself and suggestions for its use.

The starting point is a collection of sentences in the foreign language (Italian in this book), grouped according to the verb in them, always a common verb that recurs often, and often irregular. The student is shown how to translate these "anchors" through intell-

igent use of the dictionary, on his or her own if no teacher is available.

The principle outlined is put into practice by carefully following the steps and exercises proposed in the book. It divides in parts designated by letters and based mainly on the parts of speech: part V, the first, presents a large number of "anchors" in several chapters or groups, each featuring a common verb used in highly diverse contexts.

Each anchor, or example, is translated in the book in stages, two in essence: understanding what the Italian says, and putting it into acceptable English that anyone can, in turn, understand (not an automatic process). Thus, the first English rendering, directly under the original, is a "raw", word-for-word translation: improvements follow. For the untutored student "dictionary problems" are pointed out: the "raw" translation, once broadly understood, resolves them. The commentary on each Italian anchor also goes into differences in the way words are put together in the two languages: these are called Italian specialties, to be reviewed later: they correspond to what are called "rules" in the diagrams describing our "principle": where no "specialty" exists, grammar rules are essentially common to both languages.

After each anchor (each selected sentence) the student is put to work. He's taught how to pronounce the Italian expression, by imitative English spelling and general remarks, and he's asked to read it aloud 20 times, memorizing it in the process. Unlike conventional grammar sentences, like "they don't have beer, they have wine", our anchors are designed to be usable on frequent occasions: "hai fatto bene", you did right, is typical. The student is urged to actually say them, in Italian, in place of English equivalents, to school-mates or close friends interested in the language: in this way the student act-

ually begins to express himself or herself in the foreign language, although only to a very limited degree: after only one example, it's just a start, but it builds confidence.

The chapter includes some 15 to 25 examples and concludes with a retention scoreboard, followed by exercises that can be self-assigned or assigned to a class for grading. With the "scoreboard" the student evaluates, and completes, his recollection of Italian expressions in the chapter and their meaning, and of the "Italian specialties" brought to his/her notice. Part of the "score" has to do with auxiliary particles (articles, pronouns etc.) included in the sentences and explained in the commentaries: the same is true of vocabulary. Subsequent chapters, in other parts of the book, will focus on other parts of speech, making them more familiar to the student.

Full conjugations of the verbs used in part V are included at the end of each chapter, for reference: the student is not expected to learn them by heart, but the "anchors" already learned will remind him or her of the forms under which the verb appears.

Criteria for the selection of anchors. Whatever the potential of these ideas, their usefulness will depend on the care given to their reduction into practice.

Of primary importance, referring to the last schematization, are the "selected sentences" used as "anchors" for memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules. As noted in the opening paragraph, we learn our own language - as well as that of another country we move to - by hearing and remembering whole expressions rather than separate words or rules, at least in the beginning stages. We also tend to assist our memory, in any field, through whole sayings, fragments of songs or proverbs. One may not immediately remember the French for child, "enfant", but chances are that "allons enfants de la patrie" does come to mind

promptly, bringing "enfant" with it.

Another common observation: when a young man has been exposed to a foreign language but has forgotten how to use it, chances are he will say "all I remember is the swearwords". We're not being "sexist" here: the only reason why men remember unpolite expressions more than women do has been, at least in the past, because most men use them more often. Nor do we advocate using unprintable sayings as "anchors": but a valid conclusion, not limited to such language, does flow from this observation. It has to do with the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive, or paracognitive content of a message or communication.

Sentences expressing an emotion, a feeling or a state of mind, or an attitude towards the other person, have more than just cognitive content: they may communicate no information at all, just a mood, as when we say "oh, to hell with it". Compare this with "it took me two hours because of the traffic", which in itself does not convey a state of mind: only a fact.

This distinction has a lot to do with the impact of a message, whether heard or read, on someone's consciousness or memory, or both. Consider a letter that starts with:

"I received your letter last Friday"

Normally this won't register at all in your mind, and you'll go on reading, looking for the meaningful part. But if the letter begins with

"I didn't like the tone of your letter of ....."

this will have immediate impact, whatever else the letter has to say.

Almost everything we read, or hear on TV, supports the conclusion that non-cognitive, affective components of messages have more attention getting power than the purely cognitive. Fiction writers use words chosen to engender a mood or "atmosphere": journalists add "color" to bare facts; copy-writers no longer boast of product qualities but focus on

associations and images that are non-factual but appeal to vanity, status-consciousness and forms of "machismo". But even without such appeals , everything indicates that words and rules are easier to remember when they are anchored to expressions that have meaning, especially if the meaning is affective at least in part, and not merely cognitive.

Few of us remember grammar rules of our own language in a form that can be communicated and explained, although we can tell whether a sentence conforms to them: we recognize "wrong" grammar. On the other hand, we expect students to learn and apply such rules in a foreign language. Textbooks are designed on this basis: they explain the rule, followed by examples and exercises which can be done with little effort or thought by using the examples as a guide. This system is logical enough, but after doing the homework the student regards this part of the grammar as a finished item: if the rule comes up again in another context it will seldom be recognized, much less applied. This is mainly because grammar rules, unlike rules of law, health regulations, rules of math or physics, do not rest on principles and have no meaning of their own. Like those of our own language they are remembered because of the "rightness" of their application: our ear has to be attuned to them. Repeated use in 10 or 20 exercises, not even helped by the impact of sound on the ears, cannot achieve the purpose.

Selection of appropriate "anchors", in the proposed method, goes hand in hand with another technique especially designed to make grammar rules impact the memory and to give them meaning, by virtue of the role they play in translation and/or understanding of each "anchor", even before the ear is trained to recognize grammatical correctness. This is the technique of phased translation, best explained by an example. In the Italian grammar now being compiled one of the anchors, p. 14, runs:

V-1-g) ..... fammelo vedere

make me it see
make me see it
let me see it

In accord with the general ideas already set forth, the commentary explains just what "fammelo" is, supplementing the dictionary where the student won't find conjugated verbs: this example is one of a series centered on the verb "fare". But the first translation, word for word, still does not work: it's a "raw" translation, made understandable only by allowing for "Italian specialties", things that Italian "does" differently. These departures from English usage (in placement of pronouns, gender distinctions in endings and other structural details) are given special attention and impressed on the memory in various ways: retention scoreboards, end-of-chapter exercises, and memorization of the **anchor** itself, "fammelo vedere", which "anchors" use of "fare" and "vedere"; two pronouns; and one "Italian specialty",No. 6, on the placement of pronouns.

The same "specialties"come up again and again so that the ear becomes attuned to them: they are, in effect, rules of grammar and diction, but they're not presented as arbitrary rules to be memorized: they show up as departures from English usage that have to become familiar so that the student can make sense of the word-by-word translation and thus understand the foreign sentence on his own, with no more than dictionary help: another confidence-building step. By this process, "rules" are made much more relevant and easier to recognize and recall.

The Italian textbook now being compiled is designed for dual use: as text-book for a class with exercises to be assigned as homework or tests; or as a self-study manual which guides the student step by step, with clear explanations, "scoreboard" tests to bring out any-

thing that hasn't been absorbed or can't be recalled, and exercises without answers, for grading by a tutor who should be consulted periodically.

"Anchoring" is one feature designed to simulate the natural process of language-learning by "immersion": but this grammar has others. Here are a few which we believe will enhance the students' ability to actually express themselves in the foreign language, and understand it.

Multiple exposure. In a conventional grammar, "first comes first" is the guiding principle, as it is in textbooks on other disciplines, from mathematics to biology and dozens of other "ologies": and it makes sense if it can really be applied. But in language, what is "first"?

The alphabet, yes: but in Western languages, luckily, it's always the same: a few letters may be missing, as in Italian, but that is hardly significant. Pronunciation is important, but it's never taught separately, ahead of the rest: it can't be done until you have words to pronounce, although some basic points should be treated early, as they are in this book (vowel values). As for functional particles like articles, pronouns, prepositions and so on, to list each category in some presumed order of importance, and follow with examples and exercises, is what grammars do, and it would work if such learning were retainable and cumulative: because if so, successive memorization of these categories, plus vocabulary, would enable students to put together sentences with meaning. But experience shows, overwhelmingly, that this does not happen, and there's really no reason why it should. Likewise, conjugation of regular verbs, when taught at the start, is not a first step on which to build a knowledge of basic verbs around which sentences must be built.

In "immersion" learning, these things are not acquired systematically, from the simplest to the most complex (on a scale that does

not exist) but by multiple exposure after being heard again and again as part of speech, until they sound right. This is what this book does within the limits imposed by size and time. Each anchor exposes the student to perhaps one or two rules, four or five words including voices of the main verb, not as separate bits of knowledge but as integral parts of a sentence and its sound, which the student is asked to reproduce,for memorization and diction at the same time (optional cassettes are provided). The same words and rules are stressed again and again, in hundreds of anchors, more often when in common use, and often enough to become habit-forming if instructions are followed diligently.

Assisted translation. Obviously no beginning student thinks in a foreign language, and few advanced students do: hence, to express themselves in the language, students have to formulate their thought in English first (an automatic process), then translate into the foreign tongue: translation, likewise, is the essence of understanding the language in spoken or written form. But a beginning student, faced with an English sentence (his own or someone else's), can't put it into Italian, for example, in either writing or speech. This is why, traditionally, he's not asked to do this until he - or she - has had many months of instruction, and even then the result is apt to be discouraging. This is why college-level grammars don't assign such translations: they ask the student to change something in a foreign sentence (singular to plural, masculine to feminine, present to past tense, and so on) using an example as the model, after an explanation and a list of various forms of articles, prepositions and the like. This is something the student will do correctly, with a minimum of diligence: it could be programmed into a computer.

What is gained through such exercises is part of the language,

but a small part and - more importantly - not a part that can be connected into a whole when all the other necessary parts are made available. Language does not work that way: it's not a kit, with instructions for putting the parts together.

When translation is taught it should be taught as a whole, on whole sentences that have meaning, and it should start with the English. The beginning student can't do this without help, and help has to be provided. For vocabulary the dictionary is essential, as everyone knows who has really learned a foreign language: you can never do without it completely. And yet, college textbooks never even mention dictionaries, let alone teaching how to use them. They provide a "vocabulary" of their own, limited to a few hundred words used in their text, with just one translation each. This grammar does counsel the student on dictionary selection and use, something that high-school should do.

But assistance also consists of notes, supplying translations of words (chiefly verb voices) and locutions not found in every dictionary. By this method, translation can be made gradually more difficult - always within the scope of ordinary language - without deviating from the goal of total translation as distinct from insertion of the correct endings based on examples. As the book advances, less and less notes are provided.

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10-23-93

Comparison of grades obtained on similar tests after teaching a half semester, from Italian grammars "Prego" (1991) and "Anchored Italian" (1993).

| Test, 11-20-91 using "Prego" letter grades and numbers | | | Test, 10-18-93 using "Anchored It." number grades see equivalence, below. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| E.B. | C+ | 6.75 | W.D. | 9.5 |
| D.B. | C+ | 6.75 | C.D. | 9.5 |
| M.B. | A- | 8.75 | T.G. | 8 |
| M.C. | C+ | 6.75 | M.M. | 9.5 |
| J.D. | B+ | 8.25 | S.M. | 8.5 |
| M.D. | C+ | 6.75 | J.M. | 8.5 |
| H.D. | B | 7.75 | M.P. | 9 |
| J.F. | C+ | 6.75 | T.P. | 9 |
| K.H. | C+ | 6.75 | J.P. | 9 |
| K.H. | C | 6.25 | M.R. | 7 |
| S.J. | B | 7.75 | V.R. | 6 |
| D.L. | B | 7.75 | M.R. | 9 |
| K.L. | B+ | 8.25 | M.S. | 9 |
| C.M. | C | 6.25 | D.S. | 8 |
| L.N. | C | 6.25 | D.T. | 9 |
| B.P. | B | 7.75 | A.Y. | 9 |
| A.S. | C | 6.25 | | |
| C.S. | B+ | 8.25 | | |
| D.T. | C+ | 6.75 | | |
| R.W. | A- | 8.75 | | |
| G.F. | C | 6.25 | | |
| M.H. | A- | 8.75 | | |
| Class average | | 7.3 | Class average | 8.59 |

Note: letter grades, used for this course in 1991 to conform with custom, convert to numbers (needed for averages and comparisons) as follows:

A=9.5; A-=8.75; B+=8.25; B=7.75; B-=7.25; C+=6.75; C=6.25; C-= 5.75

The comparison shows a 15% improvement due to the change from "Prego" to "Anchored Italian", in spite of the fact that the 1991 class was held at 7 P.M. and included mature students, some with considerable prior exposure to Italian, Spanish or both, and much more knowledge of English grammar, a relevant factor.

Prof. Paul Selgin